

Centre shuts health mission gate on Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Synopsis

NTAGI is crucial to India's Universal Immunization Programme) — the nationwide rollout of the pentavalent vaccine and introduction of vaccines against rotavirus, IPV and rubella.



NEW DELHI: The Centre has shut the gate on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on a critical national health mission, and possible conflict of interest issues arising from the foundation's "ties" with pharmaceutical companies is one of the reasons.

All financial ties of the country's apex immunisation advisory body, National Technical Advisory Group on Immunization (NTAGI), with the Gates Foundation have been cut off.

NTAGI Secretariat will be now fully funded by the central government, the health ministry confirmed to ET. NTAGI's Secretariat was so far being serviced through the Gates Foundation-funded Immunization Technical Support Unit (ITSU) at the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI).

ET has learnt that the government's decision was informed by, among other factors, arguments from senior medical professionals and outfits like Swadeshi Jagran Manch.

Concerns raised by members of the steering group of the National Health Mission and the Sangh-affiliated outfit centred around "conflict of interest issues" in the NTAGI-Gates Foundation relationship.

Influence on vaccination strategy

There were questions about the Gates Foundation's ties with pharmaceutical companies and the possible influence this may have on the country's vaccination strategy. Global Policy Forum, an independent policy watchdog that seeks to promote accountability in international organisations, raised some of these concerns in a study in December 2015.

The study, called 'Philanthropic Power and Development -Who shapes the agenda?', had cautioned on "the growing influence of the large global philanthropic foundations, especially the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, on political discourse and agenda-setting in targeted fields, and fully analyze the risks and side effects — intended and unintended — of these activities on sustainable development".

Gates Foundation spokesperson Sunil Raman confirmed that the NTAGI Secretariat had shifted out of ITSU. NTAGI member NK Arora and PHFI also confirmed the development.

Members of the steering group aren't authorised to speak to the media. Swadeshi Jagran Manch's national co-convener

Ashwani Mahajan told ET, "We welcome this move by the government.

We have always said foreign influence in our domestic policies in any way must be avoided." NTAGI will now be moved out to the fully government-funded National Institute of Family Health and Welfare (NIFHW).



NTAGI is crucial to India's Universal Immunization Programme (UIP) — the nationwide rollout of the pentavalent vaccine and the introduction of vaccines against rotavirus, IPV and rubella.

UIP is one of the world's largest immunisation programmes. It caters to approximately 27 million infants and 30 million pregnant women annually free of cost.

Future course

The Gates Foundation-ITSU relationship formally ends on February 28. Discussions are now on between the health ministry, the Gates Foundation and PHFI on the future role of ITSU.

Raman told ET that "the next phase of association has not been decided". NTAGI, set up in 2001, is chaired by the health secretary and has on board a number of independent health experts, representatives from organisations such as the Indian Academy of Pediatrics, the Indian Medical Association, World Health Organization and UNICEF besides stakeholder ministries.

NTAGI advises the Indian government on policies and strategy for implementing the national immunisation programme and also evaluates the impact of immunisation on **Vaccine Preventable Diseases** (VPDs) in the country. The NTAGI Secretariat provides necessary support for meetings of NTAGI and its Standing Technical Sub Committee.

WHO SAYS WHAT

Health ministry: "One of the functions of the (ITSU' Evidence to Policy) Unit was Secretariat to NTAGI which is now in the process of shifting to NIHFHW...the government will fund the NTAGI Secretariat at NIHFHW for which recruitment of manpower is in the process", the Health ministry said in response to ET queries.

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation:

In response to ET queries on the shift, the Gates Foundation said that “Yes, we are aware” of the development.

The BMFG added that it had “provided a grant to Public Health Foundation of India at the Ministry’s request (on the recommendation of government appointed Mavalankar Committee) to provide technical support to the Immunization division of the Ministry of Health. This Immunization Technical Support Unit is fully managed by the Ministry. One of the tasks that the Ministry has allotted to ITSU is to provide secretarial support to the NTAGI, among its other responsibilities. The Ministry manages and decides on the proceedings and functioning of NTAGI through the secretariat”.

Sunil Raman, spokesperson of the BMFG in India acknowledged that the project following the Indian government’s MoU with the Foundation will come to a close in February and that “The next phase of association has not been decided”.

Immunization Technical Support Unit (ITSU) at the Public Health Foundation of India

“A part of Evidence to Policy unit i.e. The NTAGI Secretariat is moving to NIHWF as per the decision of the MoHFW”, Deepak Bhatia, Director ITSU confirmed in an emailed response to ET.

“The current phase project funding was approx. \$6.9M for 3.5 years. The future work and funding of ITSU and any role assigned to PHFI are decisions that rest with MoHFW. PHFI is ready to support to any routine immunization strengthening initiative of the government”, Deepak Bhatia of ITSU said in his email.

NTAGI member

Dr N K Arora, Executive Director of the INCLEN Trust and Member of NTAGI told ET that the ITSU Evidence to Policy Unit was being shifted to NIHWF “as an indepnednet unit”, to be funded by the Government of India.

“The ITSU-Gates Foundation project has come to an end. ITSU showed its worth very well and the way to continue . There have been some minor governance changes as there were concerns being raised over funding issues. Only the Evidence to Policy Unit has been impacted a little with a shift to NIHWF. The rest is with ITSU. There has just been some refining of the governance system. Everyone, however, felt that ITSU was a great idea and has contributed tremendously”, Dr Arora told ET.

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